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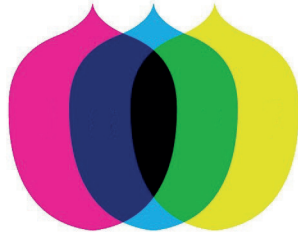
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i s r f b u l l e t i n

Issue XII

Quantitative/ Qualitative

Challenging The Binary

Edited by Dr Rachael Kiddey

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ARISTOTELIAN POLITICAL SCIENCE AND THE QUALITATIVE- QUANTITATIVE DIVIDE

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Few social sciences seem to have a more pronounced divide between qualitative and quantitative work than political science. Clearly, the emphasis on either of them varies strongly per subfield. Some are clearly and consciously mixed (comparative politics comes to mind). Others are sharply contrasted: electoral studies are quantitative; political theory is qualitative; the study of International Relations is still mainly qualitative; the study of national and local politics (be it American, or German, or any other) is becoming increasingly quantitative. Even more pronounced than the divide between subfields, however, is that between individual researchers and research groups and consequently that between the outlets they choose (journals, conferences). Counterexamples are of course easy to find, but there is no denying that, unfortunately, in political science C.P. Snow's schism between 'two cultures' has become a reality.

Much of this has to do with the fact that, over the course of its century long formal existence, political science has developed increasingly sophisticated methods, particularly for quantitative research. And it seems fair to say that these methods have gained the upper hand, if not in terms of volume, then at least in terms of academic standing. Things have not always been like this. For ages, the study of politics amounted to the study of political ideas and political institutions (particularly constitutions). The

approach was philosophical and almost exclusively qualitative. 'Statistics' has been practiced since the eighteenth century, but it was understood as the clerkish activity of administering and accounting the state's possessions, rather than as a technique for analysing data. Academically, it ranked decidedly below the normative and qualitative study of politics. This lasted until the Second World War, but since then, everything has changed: political theory has become regarded as the 'softest' of the field's sub-disciplines (if not relegated to philosophy altogether) and the study of constitutional arrangements has been dismissed as 'classical institutionalism' and largely handed over to lawyers. By contrast, empirical political research, particularly that which uses quantitative data and statistical methods, has become the dominant model – so much so, that it serves as a benchmark even for many in the more qualitative subfields.

There has, however, also been a backlash. In 2000, an anonymous e-mail sparked the so-called *Perestroika*-movement, which was an uprising by a variety of concerned political scientists against what they regarded as the over-sophistication and inaccessibility of much political science research and the dominance of quantitative methods.¹ The resulting debate was, as usual, about much more than just qualitative and quantitative methods; it was a clash of epistemologies and of views on the proper role of social science. *Perestroika* was for some time effective in opening up the debate but after a while it led to a hardening of positions rather than reconciliation. The *Methodenstreit* between 'quants and quals', or more broadly between positivists and anti-positivists, may not be as fierce today as it was back then, but underneath a Cold War still seems to go on, characterized by mutual incomprehension, avoidance, and occasional eruptions of tension.

In this constellation, every self-conscious political scientist is forced to take a position, even if a moderate or mixed one. Professionally and pragmatically, if not for better reasons, one has to take a stance. Indeed, in one's choices of topics, methods, and outlets,

1. Monroe, K.R. (Ed.) (2005). *Perestroika! The Raucous Rebellion in Political Science*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

one unavoidably declares oneself. Hence, in this respect, as in several others, I would like to propose an Aristotelian political science. As everyone knows, Aristotle was an empiricist who, in contrast to Plato, started from the concrete variety of observable phenomena. Of course, his methods of data gathering and data analysis were far less advanced than ours, but I would argue his writings suggest some very sound intuitions on how the 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' should be combined. Let me illustrate this with two examples, relating to two concepts at the core of his (and my own) understanding of the study of politics, namely *politeia* and *politikos*.

Politeia, first, is commonly translated as 'constitution' or regime, but has a broader meaning as well; it refers to the entire 'way of life' of a particular type of political society. Now, in his study of constitutions, as in many other things, Aristotle was decidedly empirical. He collected no fewer than 158 constitutions – a set of cases that would make for an impressive comparative study today – and described, compared, and categorized them. His analysis in the *Politics* (particularly book III)² is methodologically simple, but still penetrating. He develops a typology of regimes that is based, first and foremost, on a numerical criterion: polities are ruled by one, by few, or by many. How few or how many rulers exactly are needed to distinguish one regime from another is not clearly specified. In fact, it turns out that Aristotle's typology is not purely quantitative for he adds a second, strongly qualitative dimension, saying that a regime can be ruled well, in the interest of the community, or badly, in the interest of the rulers themselves. Moreover, in the course of his discussion it turns out that what first seemed to be a purely numerical way of distinguishing regimes, is actually much more than that: since the few, if they rule, are typically rich and the many poor, the division of regimes turns out to be based on a division between classes. The mixture of quantitative and qualitative is explicit: "... every city is composed of quality and quantity. By quality I mean freedom, wealth, education,

2. Aristotle (1988). *The Politics* (S. Everson, Ed.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

good birth, and by quantity, superiority of numbers".³ And both have to be accounted for.

The second key concept is *politikos*. Perhaps this notion refers simply to what we would now call a 'politician' or even to a politically active citizen. In Aristotle's ideal polity, after all, citizens rule and are ruled in turn. So perhaps a *politikos* is just someone who takes his responsibility of exercising a political role. If that is true, *politikoi* are far from uncommon and there can be many of them. At the same time, however, Aristotle's concept of *politikos* (like that of *politeia*) seems to carry strong normative overtones. Hence it has traditionally been translated as 'statesman', which is a term of praise, referring to a great leader with extraordinary political virtue. And virtue, as Aristotle states in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, is a mean between the extremes of excess and deficiency.⁴ This notion of a mean again suggests a quantitative approach, in this case towards moral excellence, but as Aristotle makes clear, there is a qualitative difference between virtue and its 'surrounding' vices as well. Virtue is an excellence that transcends the spectrum of excess and deficiency. The same goes for statesmen in comparison to 'ordinary' leaders and citizens. Statesmen are, by definition, rare and extraordinary (not everyone can count as one). Studying statesmanship is therefore also an inherently qualitative exercise. Quantitative studies of statesmanship would make little sense, not only because there are not enough cases, but also because the uniqueness of each statesman and the meaning of his moral character can only be grasped by detailed qualitative study. So we see in the case of Aristotle's concept of *politikos* (and virtue, too), as in that of *politeia*, how he starts with numerical considerations but soon moves on to the more pertinent moral differences. The quantitative serves as a starting point, but the qualitative quickly takes over and is clearly the most important.

Aristotle famously says "it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the

3. Ibid., 1296^b17-19

4. Aristotle (1980). *The Nicomachean Ethics* (D. Ross, Trans.). Book II, Chapter 6. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

subject admits”.⁵ This implies a scepticism towards sophisticated, usually quantitative methodologies in political science that I tend to share. MacIntyre, perhaps the best-known neo-Aristotelian of recent times, points out that the social sciences have miserably yet understandably failed in their self-imposed mission to find universal laws of human behaviour: “...the salient fact about those sciences is the absence of the discovery of any law-like generalization whatsoever”.⁶ And Flyvbjerg, following in the footsteps of Aristotle as well, argues that the social sciences can only become relevant again if they give up on emulating the natural sciences and opt instead for a ‘phronetic’ approach informed by practical experience and accounting for the distinct nature of social reality.⁷ For these thinkers, quantitative analyses can be informative, to be sure, but they will always remain secondary to and supportive of the qualitative and ultimately moral understanding of social reality. Without embracing all the criticisms and recommendations they provide, I am inclined to think they have pointed in the right direction.

5. Ibid., 1094^b 24-25

6. MacIntyre, A. (1984). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (2nd ed.). p. 88. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

7. Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again* (S. Sampson, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.